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SUBJ: KAZAKHSTAN: UNUSUAL PUBLIC DEBATE ON SARSENBAIULY
MURDER

Ref: Almaty 1018

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Over the past six weeks, as Kazakhstani politicians have grappled with the consequences of the murder of opposition leader Altynbek Sarsenbaiuly in mid February, an unusually broad public debate has taken place among both independent and pro-government media. The opposition unsurprisingly spoke out first to criticize the authorities for their handling of the investigation. President Nazarbayev's daughter and her husband followed suit and publicized similar criticisms of the investigation in their own popular newspaper and television station. END SUMMARY.

Opposition Defines Issues of Public Debate

12. (SBU) Over the past six weeks, as Kazakhstani politicians have debated who killed opposition leader Altynbek Sarsenbaiuly and why, the opposition has largely framed the public debate. When the crime was discovered February 13, official and pro-government newspapers published the president's condolences and started reporting factual developments in the case only on February 21, when President Nazarbayev taped a statement for official television, saying that those responsible would be punished, and that Kazakhstan was ready to cooperate with other countries interested in investigating the case. (Note: In a normal media environment, there would have been screaming headlines from day one.) On February 14, the For a Just Kazakhstan (FJK) opposition movement held a press conference at which it demanded that Parliament convene a special session to discuss the investigation with law enforcement. They also organized their own Public Investigation Commission to track the case.

13. (U) On February 22, after the National Security Committee (KNB) issued a statement announcing the arrests of five members of the KNB special forces, the opposition Web site www.kub.kz reported that FJK's public commission had met and concluded that the "real killers" and masterminds were still free. The commission called on law enforcement to ensure the safety of those arrested and asked the Interior Minister and General Procurator to question Sarsenbaiuly's political opponents, including Dariga Nazarbayeva, who is the president's daughter and also a

Mazhilis deputy; her husband, Deputy Foreign Minister and former KNB deputy Rakhat Aliyev; presidential nephew and vice president of the national railroad company, Kairat Satybaldy; as well as Eurasia group oligarchs Aleksandr Mashkevich, Patokh Shodiyev, and Alidzhon Ibragimov. The commission also made these demands in an open letter addressed to General Procurator Rashid Tusupbekov and Interior Minister Baurzhan Mukhamedzhanov in the February 23 edition of FJK's weekly newspaper, Svoboda Slova.

¶4. (U) On February 23, Senate administration head Yerzhan Utembayev was arrested and charged with ordering the murders. The same day, the opposition convened a press conference, and FJK chairman Zharmakhan Tuyakbay demanded the resignation of Utembayev's boss, Senate speaker Nurtay Abykayev, "keeping in mind that he [Abykayev] is second in command, and has an opportunity to influence the investigation." Tuyakbay also said Utembayev was not capable of planning such a "monstrous crime" alone. FJK general secretary Tulegen Zhukeyev again urged law enforcement to ensure the safety of those arrested, saying their lives were in danger. (Abykayev responded in a Senate press release published February 25 in pro-government and official media; he said he had no influence over law enforcement's conduct of the investigation.)

¶5. (U) Tuyakbay's and Zhukeyev's comments made the February 23 primetime TV news on centrist, independently owned Channel 31, pro-government tabloid KTK TV, and the February 24 edition of pro-government tabloid Karavan, Kazakhstan's highest circulation weekly (220,000). This was the first time that comment from opposition press conferences was reported by any television stations since the murder.

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Coverage by KTK and Karavan was surprising, since both are reputedly owned by Nazarbayev son-in-law Rakhat Aliyev.

¶6. (U) The same Channel 31 news program included a report about the difficulty of obtaining information about the case and journalists having to rely on information "leaked" to Internet sources. In introducing the segment, the anchor said, "Kazakhstan's press finds itself in a strange situation. These days, information about the investigation of the Altynbek Sarsenbaiuly case is being reported ahead of official reports, citing 'certain sources.' Official sources only confirm what comes out unofficially." The video showed unidentified opposition members crowded at the entrance to the studios of the official broadcaster Khabar, with the narrator commenting: "It's not clear what's going on, whether this is a demonstration, a petition, or handing a letter to management. Some opposition members are here trying to get full and complete coverage with all the details of the murder." The segment concluded with the comment, "Today journalists are not fulfilling their professional obligations and are instead becoming political tools."

Sarsenbaiuly Murder First Salvo in "War of Succession"?

¶7. (U) In a February 24 article published in the opposition weekly Prava. Ekonomika. Politika. Kul'tura. (formerly Respublika), political analyst Yerlan Karin said that Sarsenbaiuly's murder was the beginning of a struggle between political forces vying to succeed President Nazarbayev. On February 28, kub.kz posted several articles from Russian newspapers on the theme, including Vremya Novostey. The Vremya Novostey article claimed that Rakhat Aliyev was behind the murder, and wanted to discredit the KNB in order to oust his rival Abykayev and thus "clear his way to the top." The February 23 issue of FJK's weekly Aina Plus (formerly Zhuma Times) carried an interview with a retired KNB colonel, who cited sources close to the investigation and claimed Aliyev actually witnessed the shooting.

Communist Party Leader Calls for State Commission

¶18. (U) On March 3, kub.kz published an open letter from Communist Party leader Serikbolsyn Abdildin to President Nazarbayev in which he called for a national commission comprised of representatives from the KNB, the General Procuracy, the Interior Ministry, Parliament, and FJK's Public Investigation Commission "to ensure an open investigative process." He also said independent observers, doctors, and media representatives should be allowed to speak with Utembayev.

Nazarbayeva Takes Up Opposition's Causes in Husband's Media

¶19. (SBU) In an unprecedented move, parliamentarian and first daughter Nazarbayeva took up many of the same points made by the opposition in the official news agency Kazakhstan Today, as well as her husband's tabloid outlets KTK TV and the Karavan newspaper. In a statement to Kazakhstan Today on February 23, she expressed doubt that Utembayev was solely responsible. In the next day's Karavan, she claimed the murder was an attempt to discredit the president and to show he was incapable of maintaining stability. In the March 3 issue of Karavan, she threatened legal action against anyone who tried to implicate "close relatives of the president" in the murder. In her March 10 Karavan article, she called for Abykayev's resignation - repeating FJK's February 23 appeal - and questioned whether oppositionist Zamanbek Nurkadilov committed suicide. In yet another article on March 17, she called for an open and transparent investigation into the murders. (Abykayev responded during a pull aside March 23 with journalists at the Parliament, at which he called Nazarbayeva's statements "emotional," and said he had no intention of stepping down while the head of state still had confidence in him.)

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Aliyev Threatens Legal Action Against Detractors

¶10. (U) Aliyev, in response to those speculating about his role in Sarsenbailuly's murder, posted a statement on March 1 on the progressive news Web site www.mizinov.net, in which he said that lately several print and Internet media outlets had "staged a whisper campaign" accusing him and other well known people of having been allegedly involved in Sarsenbailuly's assassination. Aliyev said his lawyers were working on lawsuits against the author of the libel and that, "In any civilized country, false accusations of committing serious crimes are prosecuted by law."

Otan Parliamentarian Doubts Official Versions

¶11. (U) In a series of statements published in the progressive news Web site mizinov.net and the progressive weekly Vremya newspaper (circulation 180,000), Serik Abdrakhmanov, a member of the president's Otan party and head of the Mazhilis International Affairs, Defense, and Security Committee, expressed his doubts about Nurkadilov's suicide and Utembayev's role and motive in the Sarsenbailuly murder. On March 2, Mizinov.net posted excerpts from a statement Abdrakhmanov addressed to the president, in which he called for the president "to be closer to the people and closer to the truth because no one believes the official versions [of Nurkadilov's suicide and Sarsenbailuly's murder]. The trouble is, if we do not find the truth, bloody crimes will continue to take place in the future." In an interview with Vremya March 9, Abdrakhmanov stepped back from a total denunciation of the Sarsenbailuly investigation and said vaguely that after "very serious meetings" March 6 with officials involved in the

Sarsenbaiuly murder investigation, he accepted "some facts supporting the official version" without specifying which ones. He said he still had doubts about Utembayev and Nurkadilov.

¶12. (SBU) In a conversation with the Ambassador on March 30, Abdrakhmanov said that his main reason for speaking out was the unconvincing and non-transparent manner in which the authorities were making announcements about the investigation. He expressed gratitude for the FBI's involvement, but said it was regrettable that the Kazakhstani public had greater confidence in the FBI than their own law enforcement. He said he had spoken to the President about his concerns, and was not about to back down. In the meantime, he confirmed that the procuracy is trying to interrogate him, an approach he finds outrageous and not legally justified.

Patriots Party Leader: One Man Has Too Much Power

¶13. (U) In his March 9 interview with Vremya, Patriots Party chairman Gani Kasymov said Sarsenbaiuly's murder was possible because of a "lack of checks and balances" and "a super concentration of power in one person's hands." In an apparent reference to Utembayev's confession, Kasymov said the investigation reminded him of 1937, when "confession was the queen of proof." In rambling, angry, rhetorical questions, he asked, "Why does the state kill its own CITIZENS? Why are special forces urged to protect Kazakhstan from Al Qaeda and other terrorists, while killing Kazakhstanis? Why are state funds being spent to constantly shadow opposition leaders if it is against the law? When will it [the National Democratization Commission] finally start working?" (Note: the first meeting of the National Democratization Commission took place on March 24, and was chaired by President Nazarbayev.)

¶14. (SBU) COMMENT: In the weeks since the Sarsenbaiuly murder, Kazakhstanis have had the chance - unusual in Kazakhstan, if commonplace elsewhere - to watch a heated political struggle play itself out in the media. As one informed observer of the local political scene commented to

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us recently, "It's as if the iceberg has flipped over, and all the battles that usually take place out of sight are now in public view." If this debate serves to increase public demand for independent reporting and open debate, then there will be at least one positive result from the death of an outspoken advocate for media freedom. END COMMENT.

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